

# Independence Entangled

## The Rise and Decline of Fidel Castro

by Maurice Halperin

(University of California Press; \$12.95)

At the end of a passage describing the euphoric early days of the Cuban Revolution, Maurice Halperin laments: "Alas, it was destined to change." In effect, this attitude symbolizes his reaction and assessment of Castro and Cuba, in this first volume of a two-part study of the revolution from the first days of Fidelismo to the present. A note of frustration which occasionally marks his narrative of the first five years of the revolution undoubtedly comes from his sense of the unfulfilled promise of the July 26th Movement. For a great many Western intellectuals (including Halperin), this has been a characteristic reaction. In the first exuberant months, it seemed as if Cuba might become the first Socialist revolution to rise spontaneously out of historical circumstances, not led by a rigid party structure, and the first to proclaim a "joyous socialism," rather than the tortuous necessities of work norms, ideological conformity and sacrifice. After several years of living in Cuba, through its best and bleakest moments, Halperin feels that this possibility is extinguished. One feels that he wanted very much for it to succeed. His book is an explanation of why the revolution failed.

Although the current volume only covers the first five years of the revolution, the author breaks into the chronology to keep the next years' events in mind. Everything about the revolution was in flux as he sees it, but at the same time Castro's bungling, bravado and adventurism made surrender to a rigid, bureaucratic socialism almost inevitable. Nothing, from Halperin's point of view, could be a sadder reflection of this devolution than the support Cuba lent to the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Halperin's basic argument is that Castro's "rise and decline" must be seen as an international phenomenon. The reason he writes primarily about the

foreign policy of the revolution (the only pictures in the book show Castro during his 1963 trip to the Soviet Union). If it is accurate to say that the revolution was pushed leftward and finally into an alliance with the Soviet Union by the inept and hostile policy of the United States, then it is also true that Cuba's fate has continued to depend upon the international struggle between the US and the Soviet Union. While Castro may have been committed to Cuban nationalism and social reform at home, he could, ironically, only achieve these goals by means of an aggressive foreign policy.

Castro remains a vague and blustery figure while Che Guevara figures hardly at all. By placing his emphasis elsewhere, Halperin tells the story of the revolution through the events which touched it from the outside, particularly those which effected its ties to the Communist world. Most important were the Sino-Soviet struggle, the world price of sugar, the internal bureaucratic struggle of the USSR, the changing American presidency, the role of the Cuban Communist Party, the CIA, and so on. Gathering his facts primarily from magazine and newspaper articles, plus his own first-hand knowledge of events, he pieces together a fascinating reading of Castro's speeches, policy changes and their context. The shifting and rather indecisive attitude of the revolutionary leadership toward artistic and intellectual liberty, for example, has stemmed from Castro's need to balance conflicting demands: for orthodoxy by Cuban and Russian Communists, and for greater freedoms by Western intellectuals.

Castro's dilemma has always been to assert Cuban independence, and yet retain alignment with the USSR. Perhaps this contradictory policy was doomed, if for no other reason than Cuba's enormous dependence upon other nations to absorb her products

and provide her with energy. In any case, when Castro opted to exploit the Cold War and let Khrushchev foot the bill, he created the crisis which Halperin pinpoints. He made the economic success of the revolution at home an absolute necessity, yet a necessity that could only be met with outside help. Castro's own impatience, inefficiency and indecision made matters worse. From the early attempts to industrialize to the abrupt and devastating decision to produce a mammoth sugar crop in 1970, the Cuban economy, the author argues, has continually sunk to lower levels. The result is Castro's dependence upon the Soviet Union, an admission of failure.

Halperin's emphasis on foreign affairs makes good sense, but leaves little room for discussion of the internal dynamics of the revolution and of the impact of social reforms on the population. It makes what Castro said and did, and the revolution itself, explicable only in a sort of code of international affairs. However, given the volatile nature of Cuban politics and the Cold War, it still seems too early to write off the revolution.

James Gilbert

P - Gilbert, James  
P - Halperin, Maurice  
SOC 4.01.2 The Rise and  
Decline of Fidel  
CASTRO  
CIA 4 Cuba - Bay of Pigs